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**Critical Realism and Interviewing Subjects**

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# **Critical Realism and Interviewing Subjects**

**Chris Smith and Tony Elger**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Interviews probably represent the commonest method of social research, though they can take many forms from highly structured questioning to informal conversations and from one-to-one exchanges to focus group discussions. As a result there is an extensive literature on the organisation, process and analysis of interviews which provides considerable insight and instruction for researchers wishing to use this approach to gathering data. However, there are also significant disagreements across this literature regarding the most appropriate and fruitful ways to conduct interviews and these are often linked to different approaches to social research more generally, usually with distinctive philosophical underpinnings. For example, in their wide-ranging discussion of ethnography Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) identify positivist, naturalistic, post-modern and realist approaches to social research and more specifically to interviewing. At the same time they register the recent dominance of post-structuralist and post-modern sensibilities in discussions of the qualitative interview, against which they advocate a realist approach.

This provides the context for the present paper, which addresses what might be distinctive about a critical realist approach to the design, conduct and analysis of social research interviews. This means that we focus on what appears to differentiate critical realist from positivist and post-modernist characterisations of such interviews, but we also consider whether, and to what extent, some of these different approaches might also share commonalities in their approaches to this form of social research. This is the focus of the first section of the paper, the sub-sections of which look at influential constructionist, realist and critical realist accounts of the social research interview and seek to map out critical similarities and differences between them. Our second section then builds on our evaluation of these three approaches, by tracing the ramifications of a critical realist approach for the actual process of conducting interviews and the sorts of data that this generates. This involves consideration of three main themes. The first sub-section addresses the selection of interviewees in relation to differentiated patterns of respondent expertise. The second considers the interview as a tool for investigating the reflexivity of human agents. Finally the third sub-section discusses the scope for using interviews as resources for understanding different aspects of a layered social world. The paper is then completed with an overall conclusion.

Towards the end of the paper we are particularly keen to reflect on concrete examples drawn from our own experiences of research. But in this regard we should immediately admit that in designing and conducting such research our commitment to critical realism was generally rather diffuse, helping to define an overall orientation that was neither positivist nor post-modernist, rather than furnishing well-defined guidelines for the research process. Indeed, our assessment is that this has been a common pattern among social researchers interested in realism or critical realism and one that is reflected in a relatively sparse literature when it comes to addressing the ramifications of critical realism for particular research methods such as the interview (important exceptions are Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Pawson, 1996; and Pawson and Tilley, 1998, considered further below). An important implication of these observations is that this is an exploratory paper, but one premised on the notion that unpacking such ramifications is a valuable undertaking because it will contribute to a richer appreciation of the options and choices involved in conducting social research interviews.

### **Critical Realism: a layered ontology**

Because human agents are separate from social structures, such as class, gender and race determinations, for example, these have casual powers over such things as resource allocation, privileging and punishing people in ways that they do not alone determine and hence it is important to acknowledge the limitations of purely interpretive accounts of social action for uncovering a rounded understanding of reality of social structures. In accounting for social structures we need a theory of the determination and not simply accounts of the operation of the effects of these structures. A key feature of critical realism is it stresses a layered ontology to social reality, with empirical (sensory experience), actual (action in events) and real (causal powers separate but not always evident in empirical and actual) manifestations. Summarising the work of Bhaskar, Elder-Vass notes that: 'the empirical domain includes those events that we actually observe or experience and the actual is the domain of material existence, comprising things and the events they undergo. The real also includes 'structures and mechanisms' that generate those events' (Elder-Vass, 2010: 44). This means that interviews may not reveal real causes of action and present a partial picture. But it also means that without conducting investigations into action as experienced by actors, it is not possible to get insights into the actual and empirical representations of action. Given the autonomy of the individual from structures, we need to have some means of accessing the individual experience, and interviews are one such method.

For Marx, the layered nature of social reality was nicely summarised in the statement that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Karl Marx, 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte). Bhaskar could almost be paraphrasing Marx in this statement about the interaction between human action and society:

‘[P]eople do not create society. For it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. Rather society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce and transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification). But it is not the product of it (the error of voluntarism)’ (Bhaskar, 1989: 36, quoted in Hesketh and Brown, 2004: 352-3)

For constructionists, “people choose the history they want” and hence history is not a constraint on action. The objective-subjective split is dissolved by subjectivizing the objective – reality is what you make of it; it has no external existence. Critical realism rejects that collapse – this subjectivizing or relativising of reality, and is much closer to Marx’s historical materialism, which neatly captures the causal powers of social forces and social relations, but discusses the idea of emergence and contradictions within social reality, where the working class acts both as reproducer and potential transformer of capitalist social relations. Capitalism has systemic force; but in actual capitalist societies, social relations have different empirical expressions (French, Chinese, or Japanese forms for example); in actual events in time, agents are responding to pressures and forces in context-dependent ways, but also in ways which unite them (or make their actions intelligible) as agents (workers, managers) with other agents (workers and managers in other countries).

## **POSITIVIST, CONSTRUCTIONIST AND REALIST APPROACHES TO INTERVIEWING**

The central attraction of the interview as a form of research inquiry is that it appears to offer the researcher direct access to the *point of view* of interviewees, both in terms of the attitudes they hold and their accounts of their experiences. As such it is a key method that is not available in natural history, where the voice of research subjects, such as a bird’s call or a whale’s song, can only be interpreted externally from a pre-established repertoire of theories, for example about defending territory or attracting mates (Birkhead, 2008). Theoretical interpretations of the sounds of animals are *imposed* on their utterances, whereas interviews are an *interactive* method – a dialogue where the meanings, explanations and emotions articulated by interviewees are taken seriously by researchers. Thus the interview as a process of

human interaction involves the mutual construction of meanings and the possibility of the joint construction of knowledge about experiences, events and activities.

As noted above, there has nevertheless been considerable controversy within the social sciences about the form and status of such interviews, especially between positivist and constructionist approaches. Positivists have generally argued that the dialogical process of interviewing must be tightly controlled, using a uniform structure and standardised questions posed by neutral interviewers, as this is the only way in which to elicit unbiased and replicable responses (O'Connell Davison, 1994: 117-121). Furthermore they focus primarily on aggregating such responses in terms of statistical distributions as a basis for developing law-like generalisations about social phenomena. Thus they regard qualitative interviews that seek to capitalise on mutual constructions of meaning, especially within ethnographic or case study research, as inferior to such structured surveys and quantitative analyses (Goldthorpe 2000: 84-89).

In contrast the interpretive tradition celebrates the mutual construction of meanings within interviews as a basis on which researchers can gain access to their informants' subjective understandings of events, social relations and social contexts. At the same time some feminists and other standpoint theorists have argued that divergences in the social characteristics of the interviewer and interviewee, in terms of gender, ethnicity or class, are likely to facilitate or negate such joint meaning construction. Finally contemporary constructionists have often developed these approaches into a post-modernist position. This emphasises that such subjective understandings involve the play of varied narratives, and these coexist but cannot be assessed against an external or objective social reality that is independent of the interpretation of the individual.

Critical realists also recognise the significance of meaning construction and communication among human actors, both as a topic of investigation and as an essential medium of research and theorising. In these respects they share some common ground with the interpretive approach to interviewing. However, critical realists also emphasise that social action takes place in the context of pre-existing social relations and structures, which have both constraining and facilitating implications for such action. In this sense the social world has an external reality and exerts powers over the way we act, but at the same time 'human action may be affected by social causes without being *fully determined* by them' Elder-Vass, 2010: 87-8). This means that critical realists seek to utilise interviews and other social research methods both to appreciate the interpretations of their informants and to analyse the social contexts, constraints and resources within which those informants act. This entails a non-relativist conception of these social relations and structures,

and thus an evaluation of the adequacy of competing accounts of this social reality, albeit one that often emphasises its layered and complex character.

We will now examine the implications of some of these positions in more detail by discussing three specific characterisations of the social research interview that explicitly locate their discussions in these terms. While we recognise that there are different strands to the broad interpretive tradition, Holstein and Gubrium (1995, 1997) provide an exemplary exposition of the implications of this tradition for conducting active interviewing. We then consider two different treatments of the implications of realism for the process of interviewing and the analysis of interview data. The first of these, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), presents a realist conception of ethnographic interviewing whilst remaining unconvinced about some of the specific claims of critical realism (see especially Hammersley, 2009). Meanwhile the second, Pawson and Tilley (1997; also Pawson, 1996) adopts an explicitly critical realist approach to data collection through theory-led interviewing. Comparing these approaches provides us with a firm basis for assessing their similarities and differences, drawing out their strengths and weaknesses, and finally identifying the options and dilemmas they suggest are faced by social research interviewers.

### **The Active Interview: a Constructionist View**

Holstein and Gubrium develop their conception of active interview in opposition to a positivist model in which neutral interviewers simply extract information from interviewees, seen as mere carriers of opinions, sentiments and 'the unadulterated facts and details of experience' (1997: 116). Instead they emphasise the 'constitutive activeness of the interview process', involving 'give and take' by both interviewer and interviewee as they interact and collaborate in the construction of meanings and narratives (1997: 114). This involves the interviewer in 'activating, stimulating and cultivating' the subject's 'interpretative capabilities', just as those subjects actively draw upon their 'stock of experiential materials' (1997: 122).

Thus social research interviews do not involve passive recording, but rather active drawing out, and represent a distinctive sort of *communicative interaction*. They therefore have many parallels with 'naturally occurring talk', but remain distinctive because they allow researchers to encourage narratives and 'provoke interpretative developments' which might rarely be articulated in other settings (1997: 126).

For these authors the active interview has a dual character, involving both the process of meaning construction and the substantive meanings that are so constructed, and they wish to address the process but also to 'harvest' those meanings for 'narrative analysis' (1997: 115). This distinction is not always clear cut

but the focus on process involves the ways in which informants position themselves and/or are positioned by the interviewer; how such positioning and associated interpretative resources or narratives may be switched; and finally how such positioning may be explicitly reflected upon during the interview process. At the same time Holstein and Gubrium celebrate the capacity of the interview to 'incite the production of meanings that address issues relating to particular [substantive] research concerns' (1997: 122).

Against this background they provide further guidance on what is involved in being an active interviewer:

The consciously active interviewer intentionally provokes responses by indicating – even suggesting – narrative positions, resources, orientations and precedents. In the broadest sense, the interviewer attempts to activate the respondent's stock of knowledge ... and bring it to bear on the discussion at hand in ways that are appropriate to the research agenda (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 123).

Thus the active interviewer/social researcher brings the research agenda to bear within the interview in a light and non-directive fashion, as 'the objective is not to dictate interpretation, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues, and not be confined to predetermined agendas' (1997: 123).

Meanwhile the respondent remains an active agent, who 'not only holds facts and details of experience, but in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from and transforms the facts and details' (1997: 117). In this context these authors highlight the scope for respondents to refuse to give priority to any one position on a subject, but rather to register or even embrace narrative complexity.

Treating the interview as active allows the interviewer to encourage the respondent to shift positions in the interview so as to explore alternate perspectives and stocks of knowledge. Rather than searching for the best or most authentic answer, the aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing – the possible answers – that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be (1997: 125).

Nevertheless the interviewee is not given free rein, since 'the active interviewer sets the general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researchers' interest.... it is the active interviewer's job to direct and harness the respondent's constructive storytelling to the research task at hand' (1997: 125).



Finally these authors argue that this joint process of meaning production should characterise each stage of the interviewing process, from the formulation of a research topic, through selection of interviewees and the interchange of questions and answers to processes of interpretation and analysis, though clearly most of these phases give more scope to the researcher than the informant in this regard and this asymmetry is not really addressed. Meanwhile interpretations of both substantive meanings and processes of meaning construction are sharply counter-posed not only to the usual positivist criteria of replicability and validity but also to any critical assessment of the adequacy or accuracy of the substantive accounts involved.

Holstein and Gubrium's conception of active interviewing as an interactive social process offers some important insights for all social researchers, and it is certainly more adequate than the positivist 'straw man' that they critique. However, their approach has a strong tendency to deny the existence of any social reality other than that which exists in and through the interactive process. Thus from a realist perspective their conception of active interviewing does not go far enough. It does not address the scope for critical evaluation of the adequacy of rival narratives, either within the interview or through post-interview analysis. Furthermore, its focus on the construction of narratives emphasises the story-like structure of actors' accounts in a way that risks glossing over the uncertainties and dislocations of recollection that arise from the layered, contradictory and contingent character of experience. Finally it neglects the role of theorizing in guiding the design, execution and analysis of interviews, and in particular efforts to theorize structures and processes that are only partially understood by those involved. Such considerations underpin the accounts of interviewing considered in the next two sub-sections.

### **The Ethnographic Interview: a Realist View**

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) discuss the interview as a research method within a more wide-ranging commentary on the principles and practice of ethnography. In particular they embrace an explicitly realist conception of qualitative ethnographic research, which is formulated in opposition to both positivism and the anti-realism of radical constructionism and post-modernism. From this position they appreciate the force of the argument that ethnographies are socially constructed and thus the importance of reflexivity on the part of researchers. They insist, however, that this:

only undermines naïve forms of realism which assume that knowledge must be based on some absolutely secure foundation. ... But we can work with what 'knowledge' we have, while recognising that it may be erroneous and engaging in systematic inquiry where doubt seems justified; and in so doing we can still make the reasonable assumption that we are trying to describe phenomena as they are, and not merely how we perceive them or how we

would like them to be (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 17-18; see also Hammersley, 2009a).

This means that research findings cannot simply be taken at face value, but it also implies that patterns of data can be identified and alternative interpretations of processes can be explicated and subjected to critical scrutiny. It is worth adding that Hammersley's (2009b) sceptical appraisal of the philosophical and analytical bases on which critical realists develop their more radical claims to critique existing social structures and practices helps to explain why they prefer to characterise their overall position simply as realist.

Against this background Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, chapter 5) see the qualitative ethnographic interview as an active process of listening and asking questions to gather 'insider accounts'. From a realist perspective such accounts provide access to both 'information' – knowledge about events and processes that we wish to analyse – and 'perspectives' – concerns, discursive strategies and cultural frameworks. Compared with other ethnographic research methods such interviews do have distinctive weaknesses, largely because of the uncertain relationship between talk and action. But they also have considerable strengths, in terms of access to forms of information and perspectives that may otherwise be very difficult to obtain, such as reflections on alternative lines of action and accounts of decision making processes.

Their realist orientation emphasises that the validity of such knowledge cannot be taken for granted but demands critical scrutiny, but they also suggest that an understanding of the preoccupations and standpoints of informants (their perspectives) can help in this process of scrutiny. Thus they argue that drawing out both 'information' and 'perspectives' from the accounts offered by interviewees represent two complementary ways of reading such accounts, while together they offer leverage for their critical evaluation: 'the more effectively we can understand an account and its context – the presuppositions on which it relies, who produced it, for whom and why – the better able we are to anticipate the ways in which it may suffer from biases of one kind or another as a source of information' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 126).

In turn this overall argument frames advice about the process of ethnographic interviewing. Like many other commentators they recognise the importance of building rapport, facilitating a dialogue and pursuing the interview agenda in a flexible manner which takes account of the interviewee's responses. And like others they also underline the need for the researcher to retain some control over the course of the interview: 'they are never simply conversations, because the ethnographer has a research agenda and must retain some control over the proceedings' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 152). Nevertheless their distinctive

commitment to realist ethnography is reflected in the nuances of their conception of such control. In particular they suggest that the interviewer's research agenda may warrant probing questions, such as asking the respondent to discuss specific incidents, offer further details, comment on alternative accounts, or respond to the interviewer's attempts at précis or explanation. Furthermore, it may also involve persisting in asking questions in order to overcome initial resistance or vagueness, or (carefully) posing leading questions or expressing doubts or puzzlements to clarify respondent's claims, or more bluntly it may mean directly challenging misleading superficialities or apparent untruths. Their overall objective in all such interventions and interactions is to obtain a 'frank and substantive interview' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 142, quoting Ostrander).

Thus Hammersley and Atkinson show that active ethnographic interviewing in realist guise involves a process of joint meaning *and* knowledge production, and this means that the parameters set by the researcher's agenda include a critical appraisal of the adequacy of informants' accounts and explanations. Placing their discussion of interviews within their overall discussion of ethnography also highlights the wider context of such evaluation. It not only involves probing and questioning within specific interviews but also comparing and assessing the information gathered from different interviews and from other research methods, in order to develop a more adequate understanding of social structures and processes. At the same time they emphasise that any such analysis is itself a social construct and remains corrigible in the face of a combination of fresh evidence and new theorising. On this basis they provide a powerful overview and justification of realist ethnography, including interviewing, whilst remaining open to quite diverse styles of analysis and ways of presenting those analyses (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, esp. chapters 8 and 9). In this sense they present the case for a relatively weak form of realism compared with the arguments of Pawson and Tilley (1997) to be considered next.

### **Theory-driven Interviewing: a Critical Realist View**

Pawson and Tilley (1997) make their distinctive contribution to a 'realist theory of data collection' in the context of a particular interest in policy evaluation studies. In addressing this topic they take issue with conventional models of evaluation, strongly influenced by positivist accounts of scientific procedures, and instead draw directly on Bhaskar's (1975, 1979) critical realist conception of investigation and theorising in both the natural and social sciences as the basis for an alternative approach. They codify this critical realist approach to evaluation (and hence to data collection) in terms of investigating relationships between underlying causal *mechanisms* (including actors' understandings and rationales for action), the varying *contexts* in which such mechanisms operate and the resultant *outcomes*, anticipated and unanticipated. This formulation builds on the critical realist premise of 'ontological

depth' by highlighting the multi-layered character of social reality, and thus seeks to address the ways in which 'social events are interwoven between [these] various layers' (Pawson, 1996: 301).

This provides the framework for Pawson (1996) and Pawson and Tilley (1997) to develop an explicitly critical realist conception of interviewing which, they argue, transcends the polarised rationales of quantitative positivism and qualitative phenomenology on the basis of a coherent alternative rather than mere methodological pragmatism. In particular they converge with Hammersley and Atkinson in recognising the active roles of both the interviewer and the informant in addressing a range of aspects of experience and subjectivity, but draw on their 'mechanisms, contexts and outcomes' formula to offer a stronger specification of their respective roles:

People are always knowledgeable about the reasons for their conduct but in a way which can never carry total awareness of the entire set of structural conditions which prompt an action, nor the full set of consequences of that action ... In attempting to construct explanations for the patterning of social activity, the researcher is thus trying to develop an understanding which includes hypotheses about their subjects' reasons within a wider model of their causes and consequences (Pawson, 1996: 302; also Pawson and Tilley 1997: 162-3).

On this basis Pawson and Tilley argue that interviews should be explicitly 'theory-driven', in the sense that the subject matter of the interview is the *researcher's theory* rather than the informant's 'thoughts and deeds'. Thus the interviewer remains the expert about the issues being investigated (see Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 164, on the 'hierarchy of expertise') and the interviewee 'is there to confirm or falsify and, above all, refine that theory' (Pawson, 1996: 299).

This clearly puts the researcher/interviewer more firmly in the driving seat than our other accounts, but it is not intended to suppress the active role of the interviewee. After all, at one point Pawson (1996: 307) presents the research interview as a negotiation and dialogue in which 'I'll-show-you-my-theory-if-you'll-show-me-yours'. The theory-driven interview therefore hinges upon a characterisation of the interviewer and the interviewee as possessors of different types of expertise, which together frame how their communicative interaction is negotiated. The researcher/interviewer is seen as having particular expertise in characterising wider contexts and the outcomes of action, so discussion of these features 'should be led by the researchers' conceptualisations' (1996: 303). Meanwhile the expertise of the interviewee is likely to be greatest in relation to explanatory mechanisms that focus on 'reasoning, choices, motivations', so 'the researcher will often assume that the

balance of expertise lies with the informant in describing the detailed way in which reasoning contributes to social change' (1996: 303).

This 'division of expertise' influences different aspects of the dialogue between researcher and informant in distinctive ways. Firstly the researcher/interviewer is involved in a 'teaching-learning' process, which shows respondents how to bring their awareness and understanding to bear on the researcher's theory, especially in regard to contexts and outcomes:

What I am suggesting here is that the researcher/interviewer play a much more active and explicit role in teaching the overall conceptual structure of the investigation to the subject, for this in turn will make more sense of each individual question to the respondent. In practice this means paying more attention to 'explanatory passages', to 'sectional' and 'linking' narratives, to 'flow paths' and 'answer sequences', to 'repeated' and 'checking' questions and so on. It also means being prepared to take infinite pains to describe the nature of the information sought and thus a sensitivity to the struggles the respondent may have in using what are ultimately the researchers' categories (Pawson, 1996: 305)

Pawson and Tilley (1997: 166-7) emphasise this is not just about the clarity and intelligibility of specific questions (highlighted by advocates of structured interviews) but also involves addressing informants' puzzlements about how specific questions relate to an overall research agenda.

When interviewees have particular expertise, through 'privileged access' to attitudes, motives and reasons, a different dynamic of interaction results, revealing 'how their thinking has driven them to particular actions' (Pawson, 1996: 306). Still the interviewer retains an active role (highlighted by Pawson's terminology of 'conceptual focusing') by offering different accounts of such attitudes and reasons for the informant to accept, reject, or better, reflect upon and refine. Hence 'the respondent is offered a formal description of the parameters of their thinking followed by an opportunity to explain and clarify this thinking' (Pawson 1996: 306) or, put slightly differently, the researcher helps focus the ideas of the interviewee in relation to specific contexts, by 'carefully contextualising the domain in which subjects reflect on their own thinking' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 168).

Pawson and Tilley present a strongly didactic account of the interview process which sometimes glosses over the insights of earlier commentators. Though they acknowledge the 'tentative' status of some theorising, their model of theory-driven interviewing tends to overstate the clarity of the conceptual framework deployed by researchers and underplay the challenges involved in moving between that framework and informants' accounts. It may also pre-empt the use of more indirect

queries where a more overt research agenda risks biasing responses or alienating informants. However, their arguments can be formulated in rather more open and flexible terms by saying that they mandate the interviewer to help the respondent to appreciate the different aspects and the distinctive layers of the social processes the researcher is seeking to understand, and to do this in terms that both can recognise so that interviewee responses can throw maximum light on these features.

This certainly requires the interviewer to coach the informant on what is relevant through the character and sequencing of questions and the elucidation of areas of interest. For example, researchers might pursue focused discussion of specific, apparently pivotal, processes and their different interpretations within the research setting. Such recommendations highlight the importance of connecting analytical agendas with actors' own experiences and reflexivity, but suggest that this is a less didactic process than Pawson and Tilley imply. In this context they themselves acknowledge that several established elements of the interviewer's repertoire, such as the scope for elaboration in semi-structured interviewing, the use of vignettes to invite comments, and interviewee reviews of pilot interview questions, may all be deployed within their remit of the theory-driven interview.

## **DEVELOPING THE CRITICAL REALIST APPROACH TO INTERVIEWING**

The three accounts of social research interviewing outlined above all share the idea that it involves more than 'recording' views as a checklist of objective features to set against a fixed reality. For constructionists, realists *and* critical realists such interviews involve interviewer and respondent engaging in a fluid interactive process to generate a set of responses which formulate perspectives, observations, experiences and evaluations pertinent to an overall research agenda. Furthermore, they all recognise that this interaction is critically influenced by that research agenda, though this is given more emphasis by the realists than the constructionists. However, constructionists make quite narrow claims about the status of the resulting accounts, emphasising that such interviews remain bounded spaces which generate their own local narratives, and should not be seen as referencing a wider reality in the form of an independently existing social realm. For example, Alvesson (2011: 19) emphasises the local and situated character of the 'knowledge' generated in such interviews, as 'people are not reporting external events but producing situated accounts, drawing upon cultural resources in order to produce morally adequate accounts'.

For the realists, however, interviews provide *one* important basis for gaining access not only to the attitudes and emotions of informants but crucially to richly textured accounts of events, experiences and underlying conditions or processes, which represent different facets of a complex and multi-layered social reality. From this

vantage point interviewers should always be interested in listening to and exploring the subjective experiences and the narrative accounts provided by their interviewees, but this does not mean that they should suspend their critical analytical faculties in the process. Knowledge about events and processes, let alone causes and underlying conditions, is not simply the transparent product of a conversation between interviewer and interviewee.

For interviews to yield insights into these features, then, the interchange between interviewer and interviewee has to be informed by an appropriate analytical framework, which can guide questions, frame answers and suggest probes and directions for further discussion, so as to enhance the depth, texture and complexity of the accounts being developed. This is the critical implication of Pawson and Tilley's conception of theory-led interviewing, albeit with the reservations about didacticism mentioned above. Furthermore, informants' accounts need to be subjected to critical scrutiny not only in their own terms but also in relation to other sources, including observation, documents and other interviews. This is one important implication of Hammersley and Atkinson's conception of the ethnographic interview and its relationship to other research methods.

It is also important to recognise that these features of realist, theory-led, ethnographic interviewing have a wider salience beyond the process of interviewing itself. Firstly they can also inform decisions about the overall research design, including preparations for interviewing, the selection of informants to interview and the ways in which different research methods are to be combined. Secondly they can be carried through into the processes of analysis and writing up. In particular, the accounts generated by such interviewing should not simply be treated as a series of discrete but equivalent narratives. Instead they should be contextualised in relation to other sources of data, assessed in terms of their comparative adequacy or completeness, and on this basis used to test and develop explanatory theories.

### **Informant Expertise and the Selection of Interviewees**

One important aspect of research using interviews is the selection of potential interviewees, and Pawson and Tilley (1997) offer some interesting observations on this topic. As we have seen, their approach involves researchers in coaching informants to make connections between their situated knowledge and the generic social mechanisms operating in specific settings. In their discussion of policy evaluation research they extend this argument to distinguish between the forms of expertise of two categories of potential informant, 'practitioners' and 'subjects', and this is relevant not only in the selection of interviewees but also to how their interviews are focused and conducted. At the same time Pawson and Tilley (1998: 160) explicitly acknowledge that this represents only a 'tentative mapping of ... the location of "key informants" and the significance of their expertise'. Thus we take

their distinction as a starting point but elaborate it to explore the varied expertise possessed by different potential informants.

For Pawson and Tilley practitioners are seen as having expert knowledge about the ways in which particular policies have been implemented, the challenges and opportunities involved, and immediate influences on the outcomes, including putative successes or failures. Thus they can be expected to be able to offer their own accounts of what researchers may formulate as the mechanisms, contexts and outcomes implicated in efforts to implement specific policies – a characterisation that appears equally applicable to management informants who have the responsibility to formulate and/or implement management policies. At the same time these authors argue that practitioners/managers are unlikely to be able to offer a full and systematic account of these analytical features, because their experience is embedded in specific contexts, much of their practice will be taken for granted, and their evaluative horizons may be quite narrow.

Furthermore we should not assume that senior managers are the most knowledgeable about the substance of management policies: as MacDonald and Hellgren (2004: 265) remark ‘both experience and theory suggest that top management may not know most about what is going on in the organisation, that middle management is likely to be better informed, and that junior managers may be most knowledgeable of all on specific matters’. Indeed different locations within the wider practitioner/managerial division of labour are likely to be characterised by distinctive perspectives and priorities, ranged both horizontally and vertically across the organisational division of labour, so the researcher is likely to be involved in drawing out the specific insights of these differently located informants while also seeking a critical distance from the terms in which they are formulated.

However, this argument depends upon the capacity of the researcher/interviewer to see beyond the horizons of specific interviewees. This capacity cannot be taken for granted, though it may be enhanced theoretically by insights derived from a wider analytical literature and methodologically by access to multiple informants and other sources of local knowledge. Furthermore, we should not overstate the contrast between practitioners and researchers. Some managers/practitioners become acknowledged experts, albeit with varied levels of involvement in academic research and publication. For example Sir Adrian Cadbury was not only interviewed for *Reshaping Work* (Smith, Child and Rowlinson, 1990) but wrote its preface and published on management and business for many years. Furthermore old distinctions between different centres and forms of knowledge production may be breaking down in the internet era, with associated threats to professionalized knowledge boundaries. Finally, however, some powerful figures, such as top executives or consultants, may also be very experienced in addressing public media and providing



polished but strongly edited accounts of their views and activities. All these features represent challenges for critical realist interviewers, who will be concerned to do justice to the accounts of their respondents, but also to subject such accounts to critical scrutiny whilst sustaining the impetus of their own analytical agenda. In our research for *Assembling Work* (Elger and Smith, 2005) we found it helpful to interview such people more than once, and to schedule one of those interviews late on, after exposure to other relevant sources, within and sometimes beyond the organisation. It also helped to have two researchers present, with a division of labour between active discussion and a 'listening brief' to take stock and pose queries.

Pawson and Tilley regard the expertise of 'subjects' as much narrower, primarily focused on their immediate experience and orientations to policies developed by others. In particular they argue that 'subjects are invariably in a good position to know' the impact of policies designed to "motivate" them' (Pawson and Tilley, 1998: 160). In some respects this matches our experience of interviewing workers in British subsidiaries of Japanese companies (Elger and Smith, 2005) as their attitudes towards management policies were often explicitly grounded in pertinent details about their day-to-day experiences of those policies. In other respects, however, this remains a rather narrow conception of the knowledgeability of such informants. True, workers who had not participated in the formulation of management policies had no direct knowledge of this process. Nevertheless, they were often aware of official accounts and informal rumours about these matters (e.g. Elger and Smith, 2005: 138-40; 326-9 and 346) in ways that could enrich our analysis.

Furthermore, the argument that such informants had 'a rather personal view of choices made and capacities changed within an initiative and so [would] not be able to speak of fellow participants' encounters' (Pawson and Tilley, 1998: 160) also needs qualification for our research setting. Some people, particularly newcomers, knew little about the longer evolution of policies or the wider patterning of employee responses, but others spoke about such features in a more informative manner. Often they could report their experience of fellow workers' responses, and sometimes they could claim to speak for a wider constituency. For example, one of our interviewees was recognised as a spokesperson for other workers and another came to our interview armed with results from her discussions with workmates. We should add that these were interviews among workers who were not participants in formal collective representation, and in other circumstances discussions with workplace union representatives may throw particular light on work relations as well as the dynamics and dilemmas of collective organisation (as exemplified in Beynon, 1973).

Overall, then, this discussion vindicates Pawson and Tilley's attention to different categories of informant, with implications not only for selection but also the

formulation of interview agendas and interpretation of transcripts. However it also questions the sharpness of their contrasts, perhaps skewed by their focus on public policy evaluations where subjects are 'processed' through programmes. Thus these insights need to be developed and adapted in some of the ways we have suggested, not least in relation to specific research settings.

### **The Interview as a Tool for Investigating Informant Reflexivity**

As many of our earlier comments suggest, critical realists see interviews as valuable forms of social research, but they also recognise that they have significant limitations, associated especially with the particular preoccupations, vantage points and interests of specific informants and the ways in which wider cultural and structural forces impinge in partial and distinct ways on different social actors. This recognition of the limitations of interviews has sometimes been (mis)interpreted to suggest that critical realists believe interviewing informants does not reveal much about the social world. For example Alvesson (2011: 5) quotes leading exponents of critical realism to claim that: "Critical realists...argue that 'actors' accounts are both corrigible and limited by the existence of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills and unconscious motivations' (Bhaskar, 1998: xvi)". But there ought to be a ... here, as Alvesson does not finish the quotation from Bhaskar, who goes on to complete the sentence with 'but in opposition to the positivist view, actors' accounts form the indispensable starting point of social enquiry' (ibid, xvi). He is similarly cavalier with Archer: "learning through talking with people is marginalized if not dismissed by Archer through a reference to broader and deeper elements of society: 'we do not uncover real structures by interviewing people about them' (Archer 1998: 199)" (Alvesson, 2011: 5). When what Archer was saying in this passage is that with a layered ontology, actors accounts give a way into structure, but not the whole account or access to deep structure. As we have seen above, interviewing is not 'dismissed' by critical realists, instead it is seen as unable to access the whole picture. Events are produced by a multiplicity of causes and attention to different 'levels in the hierarchy of emergence provides the framework needed to reconcile the claim for agency with the recognitions of the causal impact of external factors on human action (both natural and social)' (Elder-Vass, 2010: 87-8). Thus interviews are necessary for accessing human thought, meaning and experience, but they are not by themselves an adequate basis for analysing the multiplicity of causal factors in play in social relations. The implications of this characterisation are explored in this and the following sub-sections, which discuss how one of Alvesson's protagonists actually utilised interviews and consider examples from our own research.

Surprisingly, Alvesson makes no reference to Archer's more recent work (Archer, 2003, 2007, 2012), a series of essays on reflexivity which draw on interviews with people working in Coventry and students at Warwick University. Having underlined the distinct causal powers of social structures, cultural repertoires and human agents in her earlier work, Archer's primary concern in this recent work is to explore different forms of reflexivity and their role in the efficacy of human agency. Thus she repudiates reductionist accounts of human conduct, whether biological, social or cultural, as none allows that her subjects are doing what they think they are doing.

Taking one of her informants as an example, she shows that he is 'reflecting upon himself in relation to his circumstances – as two distinct parts of reality with different properties and powers. In saying what he does, he endorses a belief in his own subjectivity and that his reflexive deliberations affect his actions within the objective social situation [in which] he finds himself' (Archer, 2003: 14). On this basis she emphasises the autonomy of human agents, with interior thoughts that belong to themselves alone, but also that such agents reflect upon themselves in a relational fashion, in relationship to others and to society. Indeed, she celebrates the 'mental capacity of all normal people to consider themselves in relation to social context and social contexts in relationship to themselves' whilst also developing a typology of varied forms of reflexivity and the capacities they make possible (Archer, 2012).

For Archer, then, one important role of the interview is to draw out and analyse human reflexivity, individual reasoning and their grounding in the 'inner conversation'. Furthermore an informant's explanations of thoughts and actions are significant because such inner conversations 'have powers that can be *causally efficacious* in relation to himself and to society' (Archer, 2003: 14). In these respects Archer's protocols for interviewing are rather limited but nevertheless telling. In particular her extended analysis of different modes of reflexivity was the product of what she calls 'conversational collaboration' with her informants. This involved 'attempting to remain receptive and never intentionally to be evaluative'; being 'quite ready to participate in non-directive exchange' on features of everyday life (such as child care or sport); and making 'no attempt to play the role of interviewer-as-cipher', not least because detachment would have been impossible in relation to the eight informants she knew, whilst she characterises the remaining twelve as 'dialogical partners' who 'deserved human reciprocity' (Archer, 2003: 162).

This suggests that, on occasion, the theoretical agenda pursued in critical realist interviewing may prompt a largely non-evaluative conversational approach. This, alongside the differences between Hammersley and Atkinson and Pawson and Tilley outlined earlier, serves as a valuable reminder that critical realists have not embraced a strongly defined uniform stance on the implications of their philosophical stance for social research interviewing. At the same time, however, Archer's analysis of the

reflexivity of human agents explicitly remains one strand of a layered account of both the distinctiveness and the interplay of structural, cultural and agential dynamics. And in this regard Archer's discussion of the relational character of reflexivity returns us closer to the Pawson agenda, as it implies that for many projects interviewers will also ask informants to review and comment on different features and competing accounts of the wider relationships and contexts within which they act.

### **Interviews as Resources for Analysing Aspects of a Layered Social World**

As we noted in our introduction, our explicit interest in the implications of critical realism for social research methods, including both interviewing and the overall conduct of case-study research (Elger and Smith, 2005; Elger, 2010), largely post-dated major research projects in which one or both of us were involved. However, we had already been influenced by critical realist arguments more generally, and were informally exploring their implications as we designed and conducted some of this research, and here we seek to highlight some of these possibilities. Our first and most substantial interview excerpt is taken from fieldwork for *Reshaping Work* (Smith, Child and Rowlinson, 1990), an analysis of the emergence and outcomes of a corporate strategy for the substantial reorganisation of the Confectionary division of Cadbury-Schweppes. These changes were contextualised using a 'firm in sector' approach, not simply in terms of wider contingencies but also in terms of strategic options and choices (Child and Smith, 1987). This placed management agency at the centre of decision making, but within a structure where choices were being suggested through wider corporate networks and market relations, and the excerpt below documents how interviews can throw light on some of the nuances of this interplay. Shorter interview snippets from our later joint research, *Assembling Work* (Elger and Smith, 2005), are then used to highlight some further features of critical realist interviewing and analysis.

The research for *Reshaping Work* used a combination of in-depth interviews with 'key informants' and a range of documentary sources (such as management committee minutes and reports) to investigate how and why the changes had been accomplished, identifying the main actors and the processes involved. Interviews were targeted, focused on gaining informants' accounts and viewpoints on salient issues and events, and also had a cumulative character as earlier interviews helped to identify features that needed further investigation or clarification. The researchers were generally aware of these issues and events, but were interested in how they were understood and explained by the various actors involved and especially in their accounts of their own roles. In seeking to understand management decision-making they were also concerned to discover any other strategies that were advocated but not pursued. Thus interviews with key actors recounted their involvement in the change process, but also touched on options that were considered but not followed

through: these included closing the giant Bournville factory for relocation to more management-friendly greenfield sites, or pursuing a strategy of enhanced worker participation, building on existing legacies within the Cadbury story (Smith et al, 1990). In the present context this is important because these interviews gave the researchers access to strategy discourses and accounts of the politics of decision making that were otherwise largely unavailable, but were crucial resources for addressing both how and why change occurred.

The excerpts below are from an interview with a former Director of Cadbury's main manufacturing site and consider the appointment of a new personnel manager, whose remit was to force through change with the trade unions following a major strike in which management were perceived to have lost. In dialogue with the interviewer this key informant recollects and discusses the implications of this pivotal appointment, and in so doing rehearses both management debate and his own 'internal conversation' about agency, in relation to some of the challenges and constraints they faced but also some of the resources they were able to develop as part of their reorganisation strategy. Thus in critical realist terms it provides important though partial evidence (to be compared and combined with other research materials) for understanding pre-existing organisational structures and relationships, the sorts of individual and collective agency that this informant and his colleagues mobilised to seek to change these structures and some of the consequences of these efforts.

***Interviewer: So he [new Personnel Manager] had a record which was probably associated with running down manning and implementing that kind of change? In a sense I'm asking what the criteria were for taking him on.***

***Respondent: I didn't know him well. I reached the conclusion after the '77 strike that we needed to take a tougher line, needed to be more determined ... [Question was] who to succeed him with? I didn't know Will Jones [the new personnel manager] intimately. As an old Bournville hand I knew him and had played cricket with him about ten years previously and things like that, but our careers had gone separate ways for a long time. I hadn't had a great deal to do with him. I knew he was a person – his favourite definition of himself was "shit shoveller" – and I knew that he had a reputation of climbing mountains, and inventing mountains if there weren't any and climbing them. He wasn't a diplomat and all the rest of it and I obviously talked to a lot of people. I talked to Martin Kenny [manager who had worked with WJ] particularly. I think his recommendation was most influential of any that I received, both because of the job that he was doing, because he has known Will a long time and therefore when Martin said "I think he has many***

*qualities that you need at this time” that was pretty influential. After all one doesn’t have too many choices in this kind of situation.*

*He was initially seen by the unions as an enormous improvement ... It didn’t last very long. But Will gave line management a belief in themselves again .... [But] in many ways he was his own worst enemy, but I would go through most of it again. I mean I would, that one would, do a good deal of it a lot better – but the contribution which Will made, and he’s a funny guy, because it wasn’t in the thinking at all – because I found actually that given time and patience you could point him in almost any direction once you’d learnt what his particular style, prejudices and attitudes were. You know, I’m not trying to suggest that I’m a great manipulator, I hope I’m not – but he was capable of being manipulated. If Carol Challenger [deputy personnel manager] was honest she would certainly tell you, he’s a very instinctive person and you have to play on his instincts. If you played on the right instincts you got the right results.*

*It wasn’t for the power of his thinking, it was for the basic management attitudes that he personified. ... I mean there are comparisons with Mrs Thatcher in a kind of way. Now David [previous personnel manager] gave them support, intellectually more consistently, though no doubt with perhaps a touch of world weary understanding of the limits of his power and the managers’ power and the ultimate need for compromise and all the rest of it, which are not words in Will’s vocabulary. And nothing succeeds like success in a sense, a few examples of practical, sharp and speedy support couched in their own terms, in their own idiom, really did wonders. It’s nothing which the convoluted Oxbridge intellectualism of David or myself or Walter [previous factory director] could ever supply them with. It was earthy directness. That really epitomised his kind of contribution. The detailed working through of policy was nearly all done by Carol Challenger. (Interview transcript, see also Smith et al (1990: 206-7)*

How, then, might this account inform the broader analysis of strategic options, constraints and choices involved in management policy formation and implementation at Cadburys and, potentially, elsewhere?

Through the process of the interview the respondent is both recollecting and thinking through past actions, including options not taken, and to some extent anticipating criticisms and justifying the actions he took. As such he is rehearsing his own ‘project’ - how he fitted into the actions taken, as well as the outcomes of the struggle between Cadbury management and unions. On this basis the excerpt throws particular light on one key aspect of the dynamics of change, namely the leverage afforded to senior management by their capacity to move managers around, and

especially to appoint people as agents of change. In this regard it documents how, ultimately, the new personnel manager was seen as capable of playing a role that was both different from that of his predecessor and necessary in the new circumstances.

In more detail this involves, firstly, a valuable characterisation of the conditions that management confronted (*'we needed to take a tougher line, needed to be more determined'*), to make uncomfortable decisions *'for the sake of the business'*. Secondly this appointment was the topic of significant deliberation among senior managers, and as such was informed by considerable personal knowledge about the style and personality of the new man and his capacity to play that role (*'he has many qualities that you need at this time'*). This invoked indicators such as his career trajectory and associations (he was *'an old Bourneville boy'*) and his personal management style (a *'shit shoveller'*), which were buttressed by a range of comparisons with other Cadbury managers (the *'convoluted Oxbridge intellectualism'* of the respondent and others) as well as external figures (*'Mrs Thatcher in a kind of way'*). Furthermore, the excerpt provides a brief but illuminating meditation on the scope and character of the *'manipulation'* that may be exercised as senior managers seek to mobilise the capacities of their appointees. Finally, however, the informant also exposed some of the uncertainties that had been involved. The scope for selection was limited (*'there were not a lot of options'*), and the new man's approach carried risks (*'he was his own worst enemy ... one would do a good deal of it a lot better'*), but nevertheless his actions restored line management's belief in itself (*'It wasn't for the power of his thinking, it was for the basic management attitudes that he personified'*). In all these ways this interview contributed to a fuller understanding of the form, scope and limits of management agency, and placed the micropolitics of corporate strategising within the wider context of employment relations and sector developments.

Similar issues were also addressed in *Assembling Work* (Elger and Smith, 2005), our joint research on Japanese subsidiaries in the UK – adopting a theory-driven comparative case study approach. This study was informed by labour process theory and the system-society-dominance model (Smith and Meiksins, 1995), and again utilised a combination of semi-structured interviews and documentary sources to investigate the evolution of management strategies and management-worker relations, this time in three large and two smaller Japanese-owned companies. Both our theoretical orientation and our assessment of existing literature (see also Elger and Smith, 1994) made us sceptical about many conventional accounts of the character of such subsidiaries, so in our interviews we deliberately avoided treating their Japanese character as our starting point. Instead we pursued an agenda about management policies and shop-floor relations where this issue could emerge and/or be problematised as the discussion proceeded.

As with the Cadbury research, we also treated our interviews as cumulative and iterative rather than simply discrete indicators of attitudes or sources of narratives. Within the limits set to protect the anonymity of our informants, later interviews were self-consciously informed by insights we had gained from earlier findings, especially from the same setting or organisation. This enabled us to identify and explore contrasting accounts and gaps in our knowledge; ask more focused and meaningful questions; elicit comments on views expressed by others; and probe matters that might be glossed over. Our interviews therefore had a dual aspect, documenting the spectrum of experiences and viewpoints found in each setting, but also contributing to the iterative development of an analysis of the social relations and processes addressed by our research. This was not simply a smooth cumulative process, as sometimes earlier analyses had to be radically revised in the light of later interviews, while the co-existence of contrasting accounts could itself become a focus of explanation. It nevertheless allowed us to develop, test and revise our initial analyses and explanations over the course of the research project.

Such an approach allowed us to trace the ramifications of changes in wider circumstances and policies for the orientations and commitments of particular managers. When informants were asked to reflect upon their own past experience, they sometimes highlighted 'revelatory moments' that dramatised patterns of constraint and opportunity, as a revised sense of agency came to terms with changed circumstances. In one such account a young but senior British quality manager recalled how he had been encouraged by top management to embrace a major reorientation in his approach to quality, away from that of his original Japanese mentor. His earlier expectation of rapid promotion was initially unfulfilled:

*That was the big shock for me. ... I was then asked to go away and make a plan for the next six months and it would be reviewed. I had to think very long and very hard ... it was such a radical cultural change that I was being asked to make ... [as a result] I had to work very hard re-establishing different relationships with local management, becoming more co-operative, not banging their heads with a stick but more looking to areas of support. (Elger and Smith, 2005: 293, see also 136-7)*

Such accounts focused and clarified our understanding of the competing agendas *and* the power relations associated with mentoring and career advancement in our case-study firms.

But the reflections of one manager in Nichols and Beynon's (1977: 41) classic study of Chemco, on responsibilities for redundancies, emphasise that cross-pressures on managers can sometimes generate bemusement rather than resolution::



*The thing is I don't think they think it's **me**. I don't think they think it's **my boss**. They think it's "**them**". But we're "**them**". But it's not **us**. It's something **above us**. Something up there.*

And in our own research the pressures besetting both workers and managers were sometimes recounted as insidious and persistent, with little sense of effective agency. For example, a manager in one of the smaller sub-contracting companies reported that:

*[the operators] are being pushed. Changeover times, machine breakdowns, deadlines to keep. They've short-circuited the procedure. Everybody's happy until it goes wrong. They've actually been told to short-circuit the procedure sometimes. It's not a problem until it goes wrong, then they get a warning (Elger and Smith, 2005: 197)*

Furthermore, our sequence of interviews with the small cadre of managers in this firm also revealed sharply divergent diagnoses and responses to such pressures, which we eventually interpreted as symptomatic of the escalating challenges and limited resources besetting this factory, which later closed (Elger and Smith, 2005: 185-202).

Meanwhile our interviews with workers were also able to trace how their views were related to distinctive patterns of experience over time. On some topics, such as the use of quality circles to involve workers in problem solving, widespread scepticism was underpinned by details about perceived gaps between management rhetoric and practice.

*Quality circles are a good thing, you can get some brilliant work done, you can get the team going, but if the people on the shop-floor don't see the involvement from above they don't care either ... [Management] started cutting corners on our hour a fortnight, so during that hour we would have to do rework rather than QCs, and it's just failed (team-leader, Elger and Smith, 2005: 139)*

But direct experience of other policies sometimes overcame deep scepticism grounded in earlier experiences, as in the realisation that some Japanese firms were serious about enhanced job security:

*Every time there was a rumour [of redundancies] they'd [Japanese management] stand up and say 'no'. By the end of it you knew they weren't going to make anybody redundant. ... I was pretty impressed actually, because I thought they were under quite a bit of pressure (production worker, Elger and Smith, 2005: 147)*

Such excerpts again illustrate the scope for interviewers to elicit and analyse accounts of events and experiences that in different ways address the relationship between structure and agency and thus illuminate the complex and stratified character of social reality.

So far we have argued that interviews do not simply generate narrative accounts, but can provide insights into substantive events and experiences and thus form the basis for analysing the interplay of social contexts and generative mechanisms. Here we wish to add that this does not preclude giving attention to narrative tropes or ideological themes, so long as their coherence and efficacy are problematised and their relationships to other facets of social relations are addressed. These are key implications of Fairclough's (2003, 2005) programme of 'critical discourse analysis', in which he calls for:

A clear and coherent account of the difference and the relations between discourse and other elements of the social. ... [C]hange in discourse may for instance be rhetorically motivated, to do with persuading others without necessarily implying change in one's own beliefs. Or even if it is not rhetorically motivated it can be ephemeral, without durable effects on beliefs or habits of action. Whether it does or does not have such effects is contingent on other factors (Fairclough 2005: 930).

In our research, for example, we attempted to map the prevalence of the argument that Japanese management techniques were 'just common sense', a widespread characterisation among British managers but especially among those in our smaller sub-contractor case-studies. In particular we explored the uneven salience of this argument among such managers and sought to understand its strengths and limits as a diagnosis and guide to action (Elger and Smith, 2005: 295-298), though we did not carry this very far. One way in which this could perhaps be pushed further would be to theorise the relationship between the use of such formulae and the embedded practices of managers in terms of their insights ('penetrations') and 'limitations', as in Willis's (1977) classic study of 'the lads'.

## **CONCLUSION**

The discussion immediately above has primarily focused on the multi-faceted character of the accounts provided by respondents, whilst leaving the interviewer's role largely implicit. But at this point it is important to underline the importance of the active, investigative and analytically-informed orientation of the critical realist interviewer in helping to generate such data. As we have suggested at various points in the paper, this involves such techniques as keeping an initial focus on specific events and examples rather than generalities; encouraging respondents to compare

their experiences of different settings and episodes; probing for details and implications; raising queries about puzzles and inconsistencies, including those arising from other data sources; challenging the adequacy of the accounts on offer where appropriate; rehearsing provisional analyses with informants at appropriate points; and attention to the 'positions' from which respondents choose to speak. We have also suggested sequencing interviews in ways that helps ground the interviewers in the contextual reality of their fieldwork site, prior to interviewing key practitioner/management informants. Knowing empirical and actual events in the workplaces meant Elger and Smith (2005) could probe more deeply into the manager's accounts. Naïve, stand alone or passive interviewing would not do this. As we have also acknowledged, discussion of many of these features of interviewing predates recent explicit advocacy of realist interviewing, but our argument has been that critical realism provides a particular mandate and clearer guidelines for pursuing such interviewing.

Five further points are worth adding by way of conclusion. First there remains scope to continue to draw on fresh insights from the wider literature on interviewing and to use these to further enrich the practice of critical realist interviewers. An example would be Layman's (2009: 226) argument, as an oral historian, for the 'interpretive value of analysing reticence rather than simply dismissing it', which led her to explore the significance of hesitations, terse responses and avoidance of topics in understanding both hegemonic culture and workplace social relations. Secondly our discussion also emphasises that critical realist interviewing will be most valuable when it is conducted and analysed as part of a wider research design, both in terms of iterative interviewing and other research methods (see Ackroyd, 2009). In this context the widely used concept of 'triangulation' becomes relevant, so long as it is recognised that this may involve many different sorts of data comparison (within and beyond a corpus of interviews) and that it is the task of theorising to both recognise and integrate the apparently divergent or contradictory implications of such comparisons. Thirdly, critical realism suggests theories should be 'in process' during the data collection and this allows co evolution, development of theory-data and is less likely to create divisions and disconnections between data and analysis – so common to ethnographic and case study research. Realism would suggest that post-hoc applications or grafting of theory to data are problematic. Fourthly, we have also shown that debates about critical realism and interviewing do not resolve into a narrow orthodoxy but exhibit a degree of pluralism, as in the different emphases of Hammersley and Atkinson, Pawson and Tilley and Archer. In particular, there is scope for different emphases in conducting theory-led interviewing, especially in negotiating the relationship between social theorising and the language of respondents and in remaining open to unexpected or contradictory findings. Finally there are many aspects of social research interviewing that we have hardly touched

on here. These range from lessons in the art of interviewing, such as recording detailed notes of themes and reflections immediately after each interview (see for example Wilkinson and Young, 2004), to the very important ethical issues associated with access, confidentiality and the protection of informants (see especially Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Macdonald and Hellgren, 2004). This is because of space limitations rather than insignificance, and it remains appropriate to consider whether critical realists would have a distinctive contribution to make on these matters.

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